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2020

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Krueger, Kate, "The Commonplace Book Project" (2020). *Honors in Practice -- Online Archive*. 323.  
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# The Commonplace Book Project

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**Abstract:** A writing requirement for first-year honors students ( $n \approx 250$ ) provides a flexible format that combines primary texts, analytical skills, and personal reflection.

**Keywords:** reflective writing; first-year experience; Evernote®; Instagram; rare books & manuscripts

First-year honors students have to process massive changes in their lives while also adopting the reflective and critical praxis of honors-based learning. A commonplace book is a valuable way for students to record and reflect on these changes. The flexibility of the form makes it ideal as a shared writing requirement for first-year honors students by providing them a space to develop analytical skills while learning about themselves.

The commonplace book taps into twenty-first-century ways of documenting experiences while hearkening to a historical methodology of critical learning and reflection. Millennials are seasoned curators of Instagram and Snapchat, but they are not necessarily practiced analysts. Because the commonplace book includes an assessment of the items that one collects, its purpose is didactic. Keepers of commonplace books educate themselves over time through their interactions with the primary texts they collect and the patterns of thoughts that emerge. During their first semester, students are meeting new people, encountering new ideas, and beginning the studies that will lead to their professional identity in the future. There is no better time to take a page from great thinkers of the past like John Locke, Carl Linnaeus, and Virginia Woolf while at the same time starting to collect and organize one's thoughts and sources of inspiration.

The commonplace book can be a lined notebook, a set of index cards, a digital notetaking system (like Evernote®), or even a visual medium like

Instagram. Students can include, for instance, quotations that resonate, anecdotes, drawings and diagrams, song lyrics, and tweets, paired with corresponding reflections and analysis of why or how this selection is important to them. Over time, the juxtaposition of items might help students think through the big questions they've been pondering or help them make connections among all they have been encountering in their disparate classes.

Students have flexibility in how to organize their commonplace book. Blogger and University of Pittsburgh lecturer Moriah Purdy approaches her 2010 book—*An Academic's Commonplace Log Procedure(s): Procedures of Encounter, or, My Commonplace Log Practice*—as John Locke did: a systemic model that puts bibliographic information at the top of the page, quotations and passages in the middle of the page with analysis underneath, links on the right side, and keywords on the left side. She also color-codes her primary passages and her marginalia. Others take a looser approach. A quick Google search of “Commonplace Book Examples” illustrates the myriad ways people have made the form their own.

These are the basic requirements for our program at the University of Illinois:

- a 250-word preface introducing semester goals.
- a minimum of 3 entries per week. Each entry must include the date, each page must be numbered, and each source must be fully cited. Each entry must include a primary text (quotation, image, etc.) and an analysis of that primary text.
- 21 entries to turn in by Week 8 and 18 more entries by Week 15.
- an epilogue of 200–250 words in which students explain what these accumulated entries reveal about themselves and their first semester. What narrative has emerged? Have they accomplished the goals they originally set for themselves? Have they learned something entirely different?

All incoming honors students (approximately 250) complete this assignment in their first-year education course. Our instructors have collectively created a grading rubric that we use to assess the books. We also partner with our Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, which invites classes to view several commonplace books from its collection or a digital display of some of the pages. When students hold commonplace books several centuries old, they understand that they are taking part in a historical practice. The optional visit to the

Rare Books and Manuscripts Library encourages our first-year students to connect with the campus and realize their place here.

Because the commonplace book does not demand lengthy entries but does require regular engagement and includes information from disparate sources, it models that deep and interconnected learning that honors values without simply piling on more work. It is not subject-specific; anyone can keep a commonplace book. Computer science students wrote code and then reflected on it; global studies majors wrote in second languages and then annotated those entries in English. Students wrote about homesickness and roommates and included quotations from textbooks and professors. Some discovered new passions or confirmed their central values. In their Epilogues, even the initial skeptics found something meaningful when they re-read this record of their first semester of learning.

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